

Battling violence with violins

The Hammer Band is trying to change the lives of students in north Toronto grade schools with music

Moshe Hammer

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ANNA-KAISA WALKER

What do a violin and a gun have in common? To Moshe Hammer, they're both instruments that change lives for the better or for the worse, depending on which one gets into a kid's hands first. The Israeli-raised performer and teacher aims to get elementary and junior school students squeaking out *Twinkle Twinkle Little Star* instead of joining gangs, thanks to free music lessons in schools around Jane and Finch in north-west Toronto. The Hammer Band, founded in 2007, now comprises five musicians teaching 200 kids from Grade 4 and up.

FIRST STEPS

It started with Toronto's Summer of the Gun in 2005, when it seemed like dozens of kids were shooting each other almost every day. I was losing sleep thinking about the young teens carrying weapons around. Then I thought of the fact that "violence" and "violins" sound almost the same. With that crazy idea, I decided I could do something about it.

THE PITCH

Right now, anyone can rent a



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Moshe Hammer works with students at **Westview Centennial** Secondary School, one of 15 schools that offer his program.

teach violin and cello every week to 50 to 60 kids at a time. They each get a free violin for the year, and we ask them to practice an

PROUDEST MOMENT

When a student first starts playing, they often struggle for

because of what he stands for.

He was a child prodigy but barely scraped by for the rest of his life.

more donated violins, more teachers. We want more boys involved – they tend to think violin is just for girls. But it's

Program turns teens into role models

Struggling Grade 8 kids get academic help and mentors get a confidence boost at Jane-Finch

LOUISE BROWN
EDUCATION REPORTER

Deshawn Williams didn't used to see himself as a leader, and he sure didn't want to work with kids.

But after he got into some trouble with firecrackers in Grade 8, his principal at Oakdale Park Middle School suggested he try a local summer mentorship camp.

The free six-week program gave him an early high school credit and a taste of what school might do for his future.

He liked it so much he started to volunteer and then became a mentor himself for Success Beyond Limits, the non-profit mentoring group that has trained hundreds of Jane-Finch teens to be role models for kids in their community.

Most now head to post-secondary education and set an example for younger students.

While having a mentor is helpful, it seems being one can also pay off.

"Being a mentor was a major turnaround for my life. I now know I can be a leader and maybe change the way things are done," said Desh-

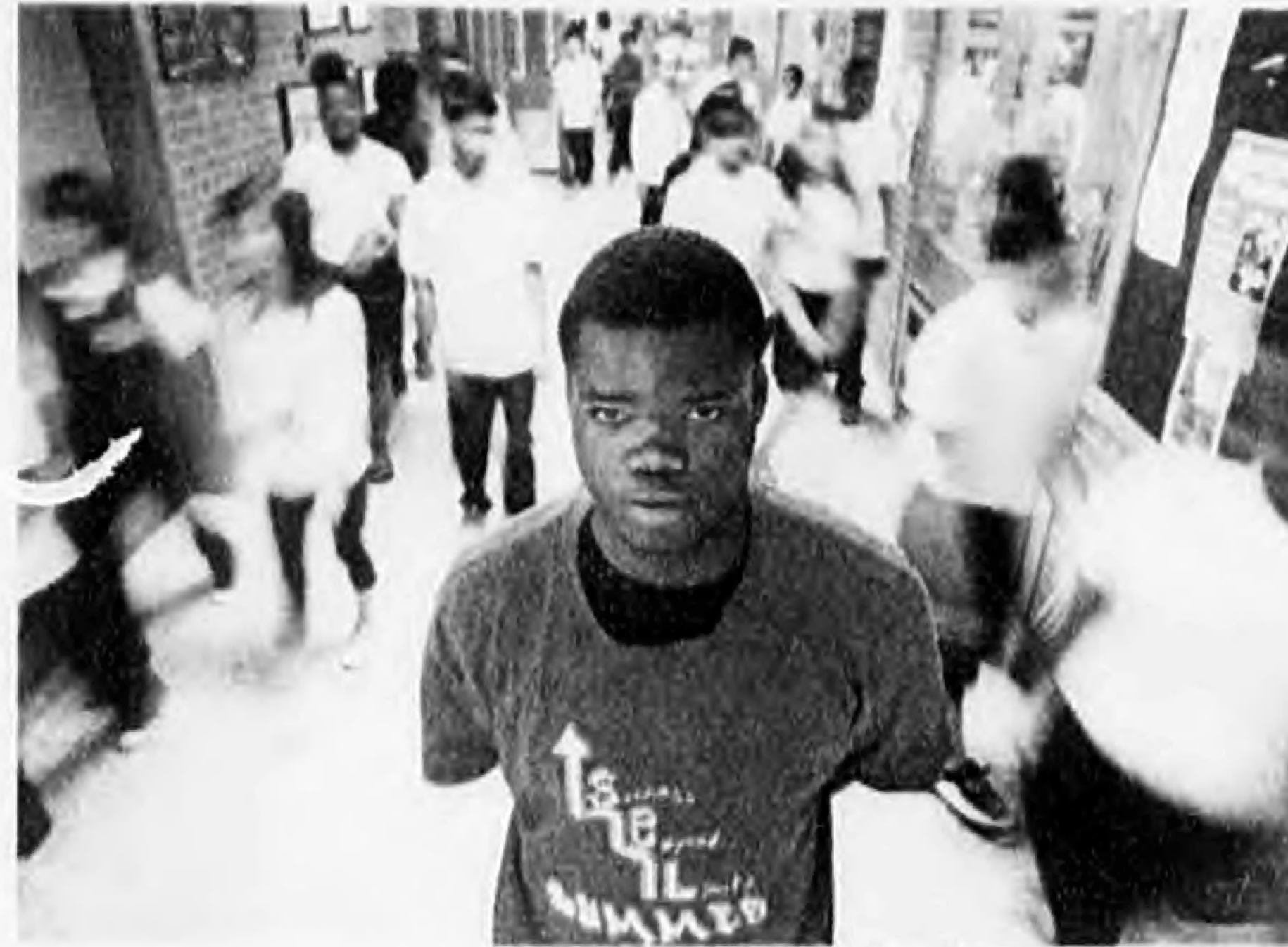
awn, now 17 and entering Grade 12 this fall at Westview Centennial Secondary School. "It's even strengthened my relationship with my little sister."

He plans to become a child and youth worker for the Children's Aid Society.

Deshawn is one of 24 Westview students in Grades 11 and 12 working as mentors this summer for the free Grade 9 prep program, where 100 Grade 8 graduates from Oakdale Park and Brookview Middle School are bussed to York University for a head start on high school English and math from Toronto District School Board teachers in the morning.

That's followed by field trips and leadership programs with mentors in the afternoon. Students who struggle academically are given priority, and earn a high school credit in General Learning Strategies. But the mentors get something out of it, too.

"I went in scared; I didn't know a young man from Jane-Finch could be a mentor," recalled Nana Tieku,



BERNARD WEIL/TORONTO STAR

Deshawn Williams, 17, entering Grade 12 this fall at Westview Centennial Secondary, stands among students he is now mentoring.

21, who went from almost blowing his bid for the mentoring job to being hired for three years. He's now vice-chair of the board.

"Being a mentor helped me face my fear of public speaking, and even working with at-risk youth... Here I am, once seen as an at-risk youth, mentoring at-risk youth."

Youth worker Christopher Pen-

rose is not surprised; as executive director of Success Beyond Limits, he said being made a mentor is a vote of confidence that too few Jane-Finch teens ever get because of the public's focus on violence and poverty in their neighbourhood.

"They're not always the best students academically, but we look for mentors who can discover new lev-

els of purpose and responsibility," said Penrose, whose group is funded by a number of charities, including the (Blue) Jays Care Foundation and the United Way as well as the TDSB.

Mauricio Araya is a Grade 8 teacher at Oakdale Park, where a 12-year-old student was caught last year with a gun in his backpack.

"This neighbourhood has some challenges, but I see mentoring turn kids around 360 degrees; a lot are natural-born leaders who are putting those skills into the wrong things," Araya said. "This program also shows them they can actually make money doing something positive — the mentors get paid."

Araya has watched Success Beyond Limits transform Deshawn. "The neighbourhood kids look up to him now." Oakdale Park Principal Craig Crone admits a high school prep program is helpful in a community where few families can afford summer enrichment activities.

"While principals can tell kids, 'Go to class, do your work, stay out of trouble,' the kids go: 'Yeah, yeah,'" said Crone. "But when a young mentor from their own community says it, they listen."